ABSTRACTS

HARNESSING COUNTER-CULTURE TO CONSTRUCT IDENTITY: MAPPING DALIT CULTURAL HERITAGE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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Dalit Deras as Critical Sites of Counter Culture: Explaining Why Political Parties Do Flock to the Deras

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The paper suggests that the mushrooming of the *deras* and their ever increasing role in influencing the political choices of their followers, most of whom belong to the socially and economically marginal indigenous groups as well as the migrant low castes farm/industrial labourers, is being recognised by the political parties as evident in the leaders cutting across party divides flocking to the deras in elections after elections. The phenomenon can primarily be attributed to the fact that the social basis of political power remains unaltered in favour of the upper /dominant castes/communities in Punjab. As the contestation and representation of the dalits and backward castes has remained confined to mere 'presence' in the party forums or in the legislative bodies, it is obvious that there has hardly been a sincere attempt on the part of any 'effective/relevant' party in the state to mobilise the dalits, constituting one third of the state's population for democratic purposes. Unwilling to share power yet compelled to seek the support of numerically strong dalit and backward castes voters in a single plurality electoral system, the contending parties' overwhelmingly upper castes leadership takes recourse to 'softer' option of cultivating the *deras* to 'deliver' *en bloc* the lower castes votes.

The paper raises two sets of research questions both related to the lack of 'presence' and 'empowerment' of the dalit community in the political domain and in that context focus on the role of the *deras* as the potential space for the rise of counter culture as a potent agency of dalit assertion. While the first set of the questions relate to the *deras* per se, the second set of questions relate to identifying the factors that have led to the gradual transition of *deras* from being primarily a blend of sacred social, cultural and spiritual spaces to the sites for the invention of dalit cultural heritage and lower castes assertion. Whether the deras are also the potential sites for the mobilisation for the marginal communities in political terms is the moot question.

A focus on *deras* itself raises several questions. How to make sense of the mushrooming growth of *deras* in the state and how and why are they different from the

earlier *deras* in this context? To what extent, the growing clout of the *deras* especially the Sikh deras as alternative socio-religious spaces across the state can be attributed to the decline of the autonomy of the two highest religious bodies of the community namely Akal Takht and Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC)? Why in terms of sociological origins, most of the dera followers are dalits and backward castes even as many of these *deras* are not lower-caste based and are even headed by the Sants/Gurus/Babas belonging to the dominant community?

In political terms, focus of the paper, one may ask the following questions: can the growing political role of the *deras* in electoral terms be explained in terms of the failure of lower castes support based 'ethnic' parties to mark their political presence in the state? How to explain in this context the failure of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a party with lower caste support base, to emerge as an 'effective party' in a state where dalits constitute almost third of the total electorate considering the fact that dalits constitute party's core support base and also that the party had a decent start in electoral terms under the leadership of its founder Kanshi Ram, a Punjabi dalit himself from Doaba region? Do the *deras* really have significant 'influence' in terms of determining the electoral choices as of now or is it a long-term possibility? What has been the finding in this regard in the large N post-poll surveys conducted by Lokniti-CSDS? In a comparative mode, why the *deras* located in neighbouring Haryana and Rajasthan and having similar set of supporters in terms of their socio-economic profile, hardly play a significant role in the social and political domain of their respective states unlike Punjab? In both states the polity has remained lopsided like in Punjab. What is then unique about Punjab that enables the *deras* not only to flourish but also dabble in the political domain in a big way with every new election? Finally, can *deras* especially those identified with the dalits be heralding the process of 'widening and deepening' of political democracy in the state in the long term?

Crossing Borders:
Bhagait Folk Ballad Tradition of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and Nepal

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A folk tradition which is popular in some parts of Bihar and UP and also in some parts of Nepal lying on the Indo-Nepal border is the *Bhagait* tradition. This is an alternative, non-Brahminical art and cultural tradition of a few marginalised Dalit communities like *Mushahars, Dusadhs, Pasis, Kumhars* (potter), etc. The term *Bhagait* has originated from the word *Bhagat* (*bhakt*), which is related to the word *Bhakti.* In this tradition the songs are not sung in praise of gods like Rama and Krishna that are popular among the upper castes but are sung in praise of their folk heroes *or Bir* (brave) and *Gosai*, who are related mostly with low and subaltern castes. In this tradition the *Bhagat mandali* consisting of performers called *gayn* (singers) sings and dramatizes the ballads of the folk heroes. The group usually consists of 10 to12 singers led by a *Mulgayn* (chief singer)

who sing the ballads on various festive occasions of the lives of the communities. The Bhagait tradition is found in the regions of Bihar like *Magadh* (places near Patna-Mokam), *Angika* (Sahrsa and Bhagalpur), *Mithila* (Madhepura, Dharbhanga and Raxaul), in the Bhojpuri speaking *terai* region of eastern Nepal, and in the region adjacent to the Bihar-Nepal border that is also known as the *Tharu-Dhamiya* region.

The Bhagaits play an important role in the lives of the people of the communities where this tradition is popular. They function as both performers who are invited with their groups to perform on special occasions and as priests who work as mediators between the people and the deities. Often they are called in by devotees for oblation (*mannat* or the promise of offerings to the deities after fulfillment of wishes) or as a kind of thanksgiving after a wish is fulfilled. On some occasions the *Bhagaits* also have a curative role as they are called in to help people who are afflicted by evil spirits to get rid of pain. For such rituals the *Bhagaits* come with a group of 10 to 12 persons attired in a specific dress. They invoke the spirit of a particular hero by singing in his honour. The spirit then enters the *Bhagait's* body and possesses him. It then performs various rituals on the afflicted person through the *Bhagait* who is its medium. After the evil spirit that has entered the body of the person is exorcised the spirit of the folk hero leaves the body of the *Bhagait* that it possessed.

The Bhagaits move to and fro between Nepal and India as people of both the countries invite them for performing rituals but the large number of check posts on the borders creates great obstacles in the movement as they are greatly harassed by the police and border security forces of both the countries. The emergence of Naxalites in the area has posed an additional problem as the Naxalites take them to be police informers while the police take them to be Naxalites in disguise.

Some of the stories narrated through the songs sung in the Bhagait tradition are those of Salhesh, a popular local hero of the Dusadhs of UP and Bihar, is projected as the reincarnation of Lord Rama, **Jyotish Panjiyar**, who committed a folly and fell from grace, did penance and deep meditation and won the forgiveness and blessings of his family deity Dharmaraj, **Chhechhanmal,** a low caste Dom who was a brave youth and was the protector of the kingdom of Sirerajakhand because of his intelligence and bravery, Lala Maharaj, born in a Chamar family in Sahrasa district, whose glory is sung by the Bhagaits of Sahrasa, Purniya and those in the terai region of Nepal and who also worship his spirit as it can both unleash violence and shower bounty.

Over the years the form and content of the Bhagait tradition has undergone great changes since its location has expanded to the urban areas from the rural areas. In addition the songs are now sung autonomously for entertainment rather than as part of rituals. The dresses of the Bhagaits also differ depending on whether they are performing rituals or entertaining the audience. The Bhagait tradition, which was primarily in the oral culture of the people, is now being converted into the written form as a large number of literature in the form of novels, plays, modern theatre etc. are being created based on this tradition. Thus this tradition is entering into the domain of written literature and many new improvisations and innovations are taking place in this tradition. In this manner the mythical folk heroes of the lower and marginalized castes

of both Bihar and UP in India, and Nepal have been deified and are being kept alive in the living memory of the people through the Bhagait tradition.

Dalit Women in Poetry, Art and in the Global Justice Movement

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World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai in January 16-21, 2004, was unique and historical in the way it put feminism on the agenda within the Global Justice Movement (GJM). Scholars have noted the overwhelming importance of South Asian Dalit women in the process. This fact deserves more recognition. It needs to be better understood why Dalit feminism got this role in WSF Mumbai, India, neither seen before nor after. The Dalit women have been marginalised both by men in the Dalit movement and by the Indian feminist movement. The Dalit women began to organise nationally already in the mid-1980s, built feminist alliances transnationally in the 1990s, and came to shape the World Social Forum in Mumbai 2004 to be probably the most feminist WSF so far. With a point of departure in my ethnographical material from World Social Forum in Mumbai I will dwell on Dalit feminism within transnational activist networks during the last decade. We need, however, to understand the background of Dalit feminism, and in what context it emerged. The paper will thus, as a background, discuss Dalit women in poetry and art in India and relate it to the broader Dalit counter-public and to feminism in India more generally.

Identity production between activism and the social sciences: Heritage and the Dalit politics of the present

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In '*Retro-modern India. Forging the low-caste self*' (2010), I have argued that the Chamars in north India, with whom I carried out long-term fieldwork, are legitimate speakers of their times: they are a living answer to the fundamental question of how 'those whose business is not thinking assume the authority to think and thereby constitute themselves as thinking subjects?' (Jacques Rancière 2004: xxvi). In the above book, I have also argued that a great deal of low-caste assertion in north India has focused on the production of alternative knowledge(s) and the formulation of intellectual objectives which have come into collision with established histories, religiosities and social practices. Indeed, with Dalits in view, Veena Das has remarked how 'the very heterogeneity of the actors who have come to have voice in the making of

social sciences accounts for the direction in which research moves.' (2004: 32). This paper is part of a trilogy of essays underpinning a reflexive project on the analytical categories and theoretical shifts which have informed knowledge production on Dalit and low-caste communities over time (and its politics), and how research on them has shaped the way we understand India today. Focusing on the nexus between identity and heritage, the paper analyses issues of cultural politics, claims and arguments across different knowledge producers.

Adh Dharam Samaj: the social vision of Darshan Ratan Ravan

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This paper is primarily based on ethnographic observation of the annual gathering of ADHAS (Adh Dharam Samaj) in Amritsar in 2011 and several interviews with key informants both prior to and after the event. This research is part of my project *Caste Aside: Dalit Punjabi Identity and Experience* funded by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship (2010-12). ADHAS is one of two main organisations active in Punjab, which represent the interests of Valmekis. The organisation is headed by a charismatic leader, Darshan Ratan Ravan, who has been described as a 'Pracharak' (propagator), but dismissed as inconsequential by rivals and commentators. The paper challenges this view. From my several meetings, including long interviews with him and his supporters in 2011-12, it is difficult to miss the depth of his commitment to channel the energy of *mahadalits* – a description used to mark the further lowered position of Valmekis amongst *dalits* – towards, what I call, 'steadiness for self-empowerment'. The paper argues that the strength of Ravan's appeal lies in his ability to connect with the subjective experience of deeply felt humiliation at the hands of the upper castes as well as with the need to address objective circumstances of deprivation caused by insecure and low-paid jobs. Amongst other matters such as valuing the girl child within the family, he argues that through education, *mahadalits* need to become agents of their own change, individually as well as collectivley. The paper also explores the innovations in ritual practices engendered by Ravan's vision for social change. The resulting distinctness of his community of followers feeds into a sense of identity that is increasingly freed from the debilitating 'lower' position accorded to Valmekis within the Hindu fold. In a sense Ravan's move parallels Ambedkar's exit from Hinduism to embrace Buddhism, in that, in both cases a 'break' from the Shastras is intended. New prayers are recited, new forms of address, new obeisance and even new marriage vows. The paper also explores the significance of the noticeable centrality of women in this carving of a different community ethos. The subjective involvement of his supporters and followers is evidence of their commitment to the cause of transforming the lives of *mahadalits* by moves from within the community. Ravan has clearly also been engaged in negotiations with political powers in the Punjab, to ensure spaces - educational, religious and cultural – where these moves can take place. The current spread of the

activities of Adhas beyond Punjab to 16 other states is an indication of its growing strength as a part of the wider social movement of *dalit* self-empowerment.

Dalit Culture and Identity: Valorisation and Reconstruction of Tradition among the Chamars in Punjab

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This paper examines the Dalit culture and identity in terms of intercaste interaction by taking up the case of Punjab. Punjab, a small state of India, is a Sikh majority state, whereas it was A Muslim majority state before the partition of the country in 1947. At present the proportion of the Dalits in Punjab to the total population is more than one-third, which is the highest in India. Considering caste as cultural group opens up unlimited possibilities of understanding caste system not only as a hierarchical system, but also as a culturally plural system. It also implies that Dalits are culturally plural and thus examining Dalit culture at the empirical level implicates plurality of regularised practices. As a result, the case of the Chamar caste has been examined in detail to map the process of invention and valorisation of culture and tradition. The Chamars in Punjab are engaged in the construction of identity and invention of tradition – an engagement which became visible after the murder of Sant Ramamand of a Ravidassi Dera called Sachkhand in village Ballan in an incident of shooting, which occurred in Ravidassi Gurdwara in Vienna in 2009. The reaction of the Chamars to the incident in Punjab was marred by violence and destruction of public property. It seemed that Chamars belonging to all religions organised to protest against the killing.

The efforts of the Chamars towards self-definition following the Vienna incident took a trajectory of a particular kind in which the distinction between native and diaspora Chamars as well as Ravidassia and Ramdasia got blurred and a new identity of militant and aggressive “Chamar” emerged. Accompanied by the new identity the production and construction of culture began in the form of emergence of songs as well as the war between the Jats and Chamars in the virtual world. Youtube emerged as the major platform where the war was fought and in the process the Chamars constructed their culture of self-definition. It has been argued that such construction of culture has all the elements of the emergence and consolidation of exclusive identities in which inclusive culture is missing thus reinforcing the caste culture as the redefined identity.

Dalit Identity Architecture:
From Selective Adaptation of Cultural Symbols to Nurturing of Exclusive Sites

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Historically, Adi movements nurtured both exclusive Dalit identity, based on pre-Aryan cultural heritage as well as inclusive religious-cultural identity represented in religious scriptures like Adi-Granth that contained the *Bani* of at least six poets belonging to *Shudra* castes, who were critical of claims of Brahminical orthodoxy. The variations in implications of co-existence of these competing tendencies have been analysed in regional and politico-economic context. For instance, in Punjab, it has provided moderation to social interactions based on purity-pollution with symbolic religious rituals like langar, sangat and pangat on the one hand and it has accentuated the fear of assimilative subordination on the other.

This dualism can be captured through a complex architecture representing tensions between structural and positional contexts. First relates to the Dalits' assertion highlighting the inadequacies of the co-option for the assimilation model. The dominant religious tendencies provided space to co-opt the Dalits in their respective folds by religious moderation of the stringent purity-pollution customs and rituals. However, the socio-cultural hierarchy rooted in the caste system could not be stamped out, providing continuity to the marginalised existence of Dalits. The Adi Dharm movement, a more recent assertion to create parallel Dalit institutions and organisations such as temples/Gurdwaras, deras, sects, dharamshalas, cremation grounds, and social groups such as Mahila Mandals bear testimony to this continued demand for recognition of rights on an egalitarian basis.

Secondly, Dalits have blurred the social divide between them and the dominant castes by selectively appropriating symbols and practices of the dominant culture, universalising the earlier pattern of upper caste exclusivity. These include the holding of satsangs, reading of the Guru Granth Sahib in light of the contribution of Ravi Dass, the use of auspicious objects (the Pipal tree) etc. It is important to note that the replication of rituals, customs and practices of the dominant caste is not a process of *sanskritisation* of the Dalits in Punjab. By their very rejection of the assimilation model, they vetoed the acceptance of the 'high born's religio-cultural organisation of society'. Instead, they adopted specific cultural practices laying claim to norms of a distinct status with a view to bring about a 'structural change' rather than only 'positional changes' in the system. This dualism entails adaptation of universal practices to structure particularistic group dynamics and negation of 'polluting' aspects for nurturing exclusivity. In other words, the Dalit identity assertions selectively adopt dominant cultural practices, rituals and activities, but locate it in exclusive sites.

Thirdly, Dalits are mobilising around an exclusive Dalit identity which presupposes intra- group homogeneity and inter-group difference preparing a ground for emerging conflicts.

This paper shall attempt to understand these complexities by taking predominantly Dalit *Deras* as sites for multi-dimensional articulations of the same for acquiring social parity, to escape from social abuse and assertions for corresponding power, privileges and social status. And specifically, attempt to know, how far predominantly Dalit *Deras* have become sites and spaces for expression (not merely of faith) but for acquiring social parity and bargaining for political power.

Expression as an essential component of paying back a debt to society: The Bamcef movement

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Three decades is a long enough period for a movement to survive in an hostile environment and without any external assistance. This is something that the Bamcef movement has demonstrated successfully. In its over three decades of existence it has battled internal dissensions and external repression. Yet it has been able to grow from strength to strength—often changing its core rhetoric to suit the times. However, the important theme in its addresses to itself and to outsiders is its ability to create a shared memory of repression and suppression amidst a constant reminder that as educated people the members of the Bamcef have shown that they are no less in any sphere than anyone else in India. These addresses that have been made in massive public meetings, the Bamcef has published prolifically (and in ever growing quantity). They form an important component of the collective memory that is sought to be built up for the relatively inchoate group of the oppressed that the Bamcef represents. This paper is an introduction to the discourse within the Bamcef about the verbal assertions by one section of the oppressed in India and the possibilities of their creating a public identity for themselves over and above expressed in the political world of India.

The Dalit Historical Narrative: Forms of protest in the Twentieth Century North India

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This paper seeks to examine two dominant assumptions that frame the historical narrative about the Dalit and Indian histories of the twentieth century North India. The mainstream Indian historiography is unanimous in its assumption about the absence of Dalit struggles in first half of 20th century in north India. More recently, such an assumption has been reiterated in the works of Gail Omvedt (Bombay1973 and Delhi

1994), Mendolsohn & Vicziany (Cambridge 1998), Susan Bayly (Cambridge 1999), Sudha Pai (Delhi 2002), and Christophe Jafferlot (New York 2003). Second, this paper will probe the historical limits of the dominant narrative of Dalit history that regards the Adi-Hindu movement as its foundational moment. Indeed, this paper will argue that there exists a rich and diverse history of Dalit protests that is plural in form and content. Drawing from Dalit narratives, weekly intelligence reports (1922-1948), settlement and other local reports, the paper will provide a historical narrative of Dalit protests to claim "pure" past for Dalit communities in opposition narratives of impure past outlined by the dominant groups. Drawing from several forms of popular movements and literary productions, the paper will demonstrate that the Dalit protests explored a range of options, from demands for Kshatriya status, claim for Kabir Panthis or Ravidasis to the Adi-Hindu identity. For instance, Chamar histories borrowed from the Hindu Puranic tradition to 'redeem' and 'reclaim' a 'pure' historical past by claiming Kshatriya status 'equal' to the dominant Hindu castes, and also by questioning the practice of untouchability and *begari*. In addition, the weekly intelligence reports offers us evidence that such claims were not limited to Chamar histories but widely shared by Chamar organizations that articulated these concerns through their political and social campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet, at this time, in 1923, Swami Achhutanand had outlined his unique Adi-Hindu agenda of social and political affirmative action, which he publicized through his press, books, newspaper, and public meetings. Recovering Achhutanand's activism in the 1920s is part of my second book project on the Dalit public sphere in the twentieth century North India. Such diversity of Dalit protests poses an interesting question about the dominant narrative of Dalit movement, and the category Dalit.

The *other* Modernity and *forgotten* Tradition: The Resurfacing of Dalit Cultural Heritage in Contemporary India

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Of late cultural heritage has been emerging as a critical site wherein *tradition* and *modernity* collapsed calmly into each other. Tradition ceases to be a value of the 'past' and modernity loses its sheen in the fast acclimatizing 'present' in the images of yesterdays. Cultural heritage facilitates a particular tradition (tangible/intangible), selectively chosen, to fly in a familiar ambience of modern surroundings; and the 'modern' takes privilege in getting nicely wrapped up in a so far neglected value system of distant *past object, space, artifact or a manifestation of human expression*. It is in this context that cultural heritage assumes a dominant role (agency) of assigning legitimacy to a particular tradition while bringing it comfortably closer to the dominant structures of a modern society. It is also in this very context that the political and administrative

state figures squarely to help coalesce tradition and modernity in its own ways to woo the protagonists of the counter culture. This paper is about concerted efforts of a extremely marginalized community in India, popularly addressed as Dalits, which has been engaged with a herculean task of reviving/inventing her lost cultural heritage at the grass-roots and national levels. It aims at focusing on the dialectics and logistics of various techniques and strategies as adopted by Dalits to rebuild/invent their lost/imagined culture heritage and the ways it help them in acquiring distinct and separate social identity in the highly stratified social setup.

Rise of Dalit Arts and Imagery: Instrument of Protest and Hope

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The Hindu social order, namely the caste system formed the structural base of social relations in Indian society. However the inter-relations are governed by the principle of hierarchal inequality and denial of rights particularly to a section located at the bottom of caste hierarchy, namely the former untouchables (often called as Dalit in modern literature). Since the institution of caste and untouchability which laid down the frame work for social relations in Hindu society, degraded the dalit most, the dalit in the past have protested against the unequal rights and social exclusion. The protest has taken several forms. Between 1920 to mid 1950 a powerful anti-caste movement was started by Dr Ambedkar. This movement later in the 1970's led to the emergence of Dalit literature movement. The Dalit literature movement which began in the early 1960's was another expression of anti-caste movement in the State of Maharashtra. The Dalit literature movement has now spread in the other languages in the country.

After the Dalit literature, the protest movement against caste discrimination has been expressed through yet another form, namely the dalit visual arts. The Dalit arts and imagery although possibly began during the Ambedkar anti-caste civil right movement between early 1920's to mid 1950's in various forms, it took a more visible and recognisable form since the early 1990's ,but caught the attention of experts in the field only in 2000's. The first writer to capture and conceptualized dalit arts was Gary Tartkov. He wrote an article "Art and Identity; The Rise of a New Buddhist Imagery." Since that time a number of writers have tried to study the dalit visual arts, which have emerged in the form of painting, prints, sculpture, architecture, and other forms such as wall posters and photographs. These studies, although limited in number provides us an idea about the nature of dalit art and imagery.

In this paper we try to capture the feature of the Dalit visual art and imagery based on the published literature. We look in to some interrelated questions. What does the

Dalit visual arts express? What does Dalit arts seek? It emerged from the study of present literature on dalit arts, that Dalit arts express the experiences of their Excluded life. It also visualized the sources of Excluded life in Institution of Caste and untouchably. It does stop at that, but also captured the protest by Dalit against caste system and oppressive feature Religion. After analysing these features of dalit arts and imagery, in the end we ask the question: What then is Dalit arts? What does it represent?

Dalit Cultural Heritage in Punjab: A Study of *Jathera* Shrines of the Ad Dharmi Community

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The paper examines the emerging Dalit *jathera* shrines as cultural-heritage in contemporary Punjab. It shows how the Dalits are constructing and reconstructing the multi-stories shrines of jatheras as an endeavor to create memorial cultural heritage that related to their sense of pride. The construction of shrines and myths of jathera memorial is a heritage process. It aims at interpreting and inventing the past for present and future interests. The local memories of the jatheras are awakened by their descendents and subsequently shrines were constructed to commemorate their memories. The process of the remembering the jathera and construction of shrines also creates, mediates and invents relationships between the Dalits in Punjab and their wide Dalit diaspora brothers. The present study is an attempt to reveal the multiple meanings of jathera shrines for Dalits in Punjab and overseas. Jathera shrines are not only used as religious/cultural site to pay obeisance to Dalit ancestors but their construction is a witting search for the lost Dalit identity and cultural heritage roots. So the construction of cultural heritage through the shrines of jatheras is the result of multinational concern, the local economy and rising Dalit consciousness. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part deals with the meaning and traditions performed by Dalits related to jatheras which have become the part of their socio-cultural life. Second part shows the process of construction of cultural heritage among Dalits in Punjab. The third part will illustrate how the shrines of jatheras are emerging as a potent Dalit cultural heritage. The fourth part will include the concluding remarks on the overall discussion.